Overcoming "Self-Esteem"

Why Our Compulsive Drive for "Self-Esteem" Is Anxiety-Provoking, Socially Inhibiting, and Self-Sabotaging

by David Mills
with an afterword by Albert Ellis, Ph.D.

Twenty years ago, when a person complained of depression or unhappiness, helpful friends or therapists might have offered the following counsel:

> "Don't dwell on your own misfortune. Try instead to become creatively absorbed in outside interests and external activities. Stop obsessively contemplating your own navel. Develop rewarding interpersonal relationships. Get your mind off yourself. If you merely focus attention elsewhere, your self-centered emotional problems will die of neglect."

Today, however, the same individual, suffering the same depression or unhappiness, would likely hear radically different and quite contradictory suggestions and guidance, such as this:

> "Stop worrying about other people. Try instead to build up your own sense of self-worth. Take pride in yourself! Work toward elevating your own self-respect and enhancing your self-image. Your feelings of unhappiness and depression will surely evaporate if you only esteem yourself more highly!"

Clearly, something has changed in the kind of popular advice being given to the forlorn. Instead of espousing that mental health be realized through more objective appraisal of the external world, we now seem preoccupied with the wholly *internal* effort to elevate our own self-appraisal or "self-worth." Forget our former effort to perceive the universe objectively; today we simply want to feel good about *ourselves.* It has become increasingly irrelevant whether or not an individual's critical reasoning accurately maps external reality. All that matters, it seems, is his or her internal self-image.

Because of this shift in popular emphasis from external preoccupation to internal self-contemplation, we find our libraries and bookstores stacked with radically different self-help texts from those published a few decades ago. Each new volume proclaims a "breakthrough technique" or "revolutionary method" for conquering our ever-present doubts about our "true" value. Best-selling books, such as *I'm OK, You're OK,* have sought to instill within the doubtful individual a belief that, although he may not be perfect, he is at least okay and can thus bestow upon himself a modest allotment of self-respect and happiness.

Yet despite the wide distribution of such popular texts, and despite our tireless efforts to build within ourselves and our children a sense of self-worth, it seems that the average person today is as confused as ever (perhaps more so!) about her so-called "self-worth." Our lofty sermons deifying self-esteem have produced few, if any, tangible results. In practical terms, the average person doesn't know *what* to believe about her "self" nor *how* she is supposed to establish such a "positive self-image." The entire concept of "personal worth" has become hopelessly ill-defined and philosophically empty.

It is my contention that the promotion of "self-esteem" has done demonstrably more harm than good, and that the prudent individual will resist the arrogant and childish temptation to "esteem himself." Put another way, we shall learn in this article why an individual would enjoy increased emotional stability and contentment, and suffer far less anxiety and inhibition *by abandoning his drive for self-esteem.*

Unfortunately, the entire discussion in many psychological circles has now focused on how best to *teach* self-esteem, rather than on *whether* self-valuation or self-rating is emotionally healthy. Our blind devotion to self-esteem has become a virtual religion, a religion in which the worshiper and the worshiped are the same individual! The nobility of self-esteem has become a sacred, unchallenged article of faith. And just as the non-Christian is perceived as immoral by the fundamentalist believer, so too the proposal to abandon self-esteem must appear a dangerous and obscene heresy to those preaching the self-esteeming gospel.

We tend to ascribe many of our social maladies, such as drug abuse, to a lack of self-esteem among teenagers. Criminals, we say, have little self-respect; otherwise they would not behave as they do. Religious institutions especially have proposed an inextricable link between morality and self-respect: a person without self-respect is thought to be a person without ethical standards. It is popularly believed that the poor, the downtrodden, and the homeless individual put herself in her sorry condition through a lack of self-pride. "Pride goes before a fall." We harbor no doubt that a fallen person, completely unaided, can pick herself up by the bootstraps, if she only regains her self-esteem.

Dale Carnegie, the genius of human relations, observed over fifty years ago that each person craves a "feeling of importance" and longs to be recognized, praised, and appreciated by his peers. Freud himself proposed that virtually all human behavior can be traced ultimately to two basic instincts: the sex drive, and the "desire to be great." The contemporary psychotherapist, Nathaniel Branden, along with his mentor, the late philosopher, Ayn Rand, hammers home one point repeatedly: that the "psychology of self-esteem" is indispensable to an individual's intellectual growth and overall psychological well-being.

Why, then, would we want to abandon self-esteem? Isn't such an idea fundamentally flawed, if not downright immoral? Wouldn't society soon wither and decay if such a twisted suggestion were adopted? How could a person conceivably enjoy his life without some measure of self-esteem?

Let's begin with a precise definition of terms. When we say that an individual has self-esteem or self-respect, self-love, self-admiration, or self-worth, we do not mean that he values himself without any proposed justification. People do tend to view themselves positively for a *reason,* the basis for which is usually that they perceive, correctly or incorrectly, that they possess admirable personal *traits* (e.g., high intelligence, creative talent, physical attractiveness) or have accomplished some outstanding personal achievement (e.g., graduated from medical school, married well, landed a prestigious job). Self-esteem, it appears, is *conditional;* it comes through *perceived individual accomplishment or through supposed possession of desirable personal characteristics.*

A businessman may enjoy self-esteem because, from his viewpoint, he is professionally successful and treats his family well. A teenage girl boasts self-esteem because she earned straight A's on her report card and made the varsity cheerleading squad. A politician may feel self-esteem because she won a lopsided victory in the last election and sponsored a popular congressional bill to help her constituents. *Nearly always, people rate or esteem themselves on the basis of certain achievements.*

Remember Key Point #1: Most people unfortunately believe that self-esteem must, in some way, be *earned through accomplishments.*

Not only do most individuals believe that self-esteem must be earned, but also that it must be reinforced repeatedly and tirelessly if it is to survive within their psychological framework. As an illustration, think for a moment about your own personal achievements. Select three lifetime accomplishments of which you are most proud. Take ample time; give this question careful reflection before continuing.

Now, after recalling your three most celebrated successes, ask yourself this question: "How long did I esteem my*self* following each of these achievements?" Your probable answer is "Not very long."

Regardless of how magnificent our performance at any specific endeavor, our feelings of increased self-worth following such an accomplishment are almost invariably short-lived. No feat of bravery, act of heroism, or display of superior intellectual acumen will bless the individual with *permanent* self-esteem. He must savor the moment: for soon his expanded ego will deflate and, once again, he will feel driven to prove himself worthy of life and happiness.

A majority of people seem to believe that, if they could gloriously achieve X or Y in their lifetime, such an accomplishment would forever rid them of intermittent feelings of inadequacy. They might aspire to be chief executive officer of their corporation. They might envision themselves discovering a cure for cancer. Or they might fantasize about marrying a highly desirable person of the opposite sex. But whatever the objective, it is folly to believe that this "ultimate" triumph will provide more than a temporary, fleeting sensation of self-esteem.

It is no surprise, for example, that many long-retired boxers feel compelled to reenter the spotlight (e.g., Mohammed Ali, Joe Frazier, George Foreman, Sugar Ray Leonard). Financial compensation, however important, was not the primary motivation inspiring their return to the ring. These champions sought to resurrect within themselves that former feeling of self-pride, which came through defeating a weaker opponent and through being the focus of public adoration. Not only the champion boxer, but many of us find it disheartening, or even depressing, when forced to retire from a job, the performance of which is integral to our self-esteem.

Presidents Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan all disclosed in their respective memoirs that even becoming President of the United States soon became a routine, often boring affair. All four Presidents wrote that despite being at the pinnacle of power, they sometimes lacked full confidence in their executive decisions and, as a result, suffered occasional feelings of insecurity and self-doubt.

So even famous and powerful individuals become discontent quickly if *future* goals are not continually established, pursued, and realized. Accomplishing X or Y, even when X or Y literally means winning the U.S. Presidency, will provide only a temporary emotional glow. President Nixon, in fact, described his disillusionment when, on the night of his 1972 re-election landslide, he inexplicably felt no pleasure or emotional excitement of any kind. By 1972, Nixon had already been President for four years and no longer derived self-esteem merely through being chief executive.

Famous individuals, whether they are politicians, movie stars, athletes or whatever, do not permanently *feel* their fame in the way imagined by the factory worker or the housewife. Even the Queen of England would probably soon feel despondent if separated from relationships and challenging activities essential to her self-esteem. Likewise for us commoners.

When people base their *self*-esteem on specific behaviors or accomplishments, they must constantly strive for, and perpetually achieve, *new* goals if their ego intoxication is to continue.

Remember Key Point #2: When self-esteem is based on *accomplishments,* it must be earned *repeatedly.* It is *never* permanent.

If self-esteem is realized through the successful completion of a particular task or goal, and if additional achievement must be eternally forthcoming, then it follows logically that all of us mortal human beings live in constant peril of *losing* our self-esteem: for at any moment we may fail to perform adequately our exalted task. Worse yet, we may neglect to maintain those character traits or the desired physical appearance which we have so thoroughly incorporated into our personal tabulation of self-worth.

The football player, esteeming himself for his athletic ability, feels humiliated and self-loathing after repeatedly fumbling the ball. The college professor, priding herself on her

eloquence in public debate, feels disgraced when her opponent's arguments are clearly superior to her own. The teenage boy, deriving self-esteem exclusively through his girlfriend's adoration, suffers the tortures of the damned when rejected by his beloved.

It appears that the only theoretical means by which an individual could enjoy *consistent* self-esteem would be for him to become incapable of failure. He would, in addition, have to live in an environment where disappointment is impossible. He must, in other words, transcend his mortal limitations and become a godlike being, immune from innate human fallibility, and possessing virtual omniscience and omnipotence. He must reside in some kind of heaven, where no rejection or behavioral inadequacies can occur. Otherwise, his fragile self-esteem is vulnerable to human failure and weakness and to the terrestrial terrors impinging upon him from without.

Dr. Albert Ellis, the innovative creator of Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), has suggested that "self-esteem" is simply a manifestation of what he calls a "Jehovah complex." According to Ellis, a person may observe that she has performed a certain task well, or that she possesses some desirable character trait; and these self-perceptions may be quite realistic and accurate. But the "Jehovah complex" rears its grandiose head when the individual follows up her flattering conclusions with an arrogant *non sequitur* or "magical leap" in her thinking. Instead of believing (accurately) that she is simply a person whose *performance* excelled or whose *traits* are commendable, she will globally rate herself as a superior *person.* She sees no distinction whatever between her*self* and her *behavior;* to her, they are one and the same. If her performance is good, then *she* becomes good. Since her achievement was superior, she considers her*self* a superior, godlike individual, far above the lowly slobs she defeated. She will, for a time, revel in self-esteem and feel much happier than if she concluded merely that her external *behavior* was superior.

Unfortunately for the individual who is globally rating her entire *worth* on the basis of the *behavior,* her self-esteem will not be sustained for long. The person who feels noble and godlike today for succeeding, will feel equally hellish and self-despising tomorrow for the slightest failure. Her entire self-perceived "value" as a human being is determined by satisfying some external goal. And when she fails to achieve this majestic external goal (as she invariably will do from time to time), her life seems worthless and pointless to her.

The successful individual concluded not only that she *performed* well, but also that she was transformed thereby into a superior human *being.* Likewise, the individual failing to achieve her goal may conclude not only that her *performance* was inadequate, but also that she *herself* is a failure as a *human being.* Instead of feeling moderately disappointed that she failed at her task, she feels utterly devastated that she is an "inferior" *person.* Sooner or later, the *self*-esteeming individual will pay the price for making her self-worth contingent upon outstanding achievement. Metaphorically at least, the universe will serve justice upon the sin of pride.

There is a curious theory circulating that self-rating and striving for "self-respect" encourage moral behavior; and that unless a person condemns his entire *self* for any immoral acts, he soon becomes decadent. In fact, however, a person's "self-respect," far from promoting ethical standards, may actually predispose the offending individual to *deny* the immorality of his acts: for example, the preschooler he beat "learned a good lesson." The cab driver he murdered "deserved to die." The coed he raped "enjoyed it." The convenience store he robbed "didn't need the money."

To preserve his own "self-respect," even the most heinous criminal can quickly rationalize excuses for his deplorable conduct. A philosophy of self-esteem, therefore, does not guarantee moral behavior. On the contrary, self-rating often encourages the individual to redefine morality in self-serving ways, to guarantee the survival of his self-respect.

The opposite of self-esteem is *not* self-hatred. In actuality, self-esteem and self-hatred are twin incarnations of the same underlying philosophy: that one must appraise *himself* in relation to his achievements. Self-esteem and self-hatred therefore are two sides of the same self-appraising coin. If you view yourself as exalted and lordly for your successes, then you will automatically view yourself as paltry and worthless when failing. It is a package deal: you cannot enjoy self-worship without very soon suffering self-damnation. The tacit logic upholding your self-esteem can just as easily document your abject worthlessness. The individual who lusts after self-esteem will forever ride an unstable emotional roller coaster, up and down, up and down. He may indeed soar quickly to great heights. But he will inevitably sink rapidly into the depths of despair and dejection, because it is a single philosophy, his philosophy of *contingent self-rating*, that produces both his positive and his negative self-image.

Remember Key Point #3: The concept of self-esteem leads intermittently to self-damnation.

Even if we grant that a compulsion for self-esteem occasionally produces adverse side effects, doesn't the average individual still derive much more benefit than harm from pursuing a positive self-image? Isn't the small price worth paying?

The short answer to this question is *no*: the price usually is *not* worth paying. The expense we incur for esteeming ourselves is by no means limited to feelings of humiliation when we fail at something. If that were the case (that is, if the only unpleasant consequence of self-esteem were an occasional feeling of disgrace when failing), then one could legitimately argue that self-esteem often benefits individuals who are exceptionally successful, attractive, or talented. Artistic individuals, we say, are motivated by pride in their creative projects. If a person paints a breathtaking masterpiece or writes a poignant novel, then surely she will esteem herself; and it is this sought-for feeling of glorification and achievement that seems to inspire many creative pursuits.

To a limited extent, the drive for self-esteem probably does spur some individuals to productive and creative activity. This reality, in fact, seems to be a popular "selling point" for self-esteem. Unfortunately, however, instead of stimulating genius and creativity, the theology of self-esteem more often results in *severe behavioral inhibition and debilitating anxiety.* With his entire self-worth at stake, the average individual will desperately avoid all "dangerous" situations in which his self-esteem is perceived to be at risk.

Take, for example, the average-looking, average-intelligence single male, who feels romantically and sexually attracted to a woman of extraordinary brilliance. This gentleman may fantasize vividly about dating or marrying such a desirable woman, and his self-esteem would no doubt be temporarily elevated if his fantasies were realized. But this man's self-rating philosophy (i.e., his belief that self-worth flows from success) virtually guarantees that he will never befriend the woman he considers most desirable. Why? Because his precious self-esteem would be destroyed if he were rejected openly by such an accomplished female. He cannot risk the "danger." He will play it safe, asking out a less intelligent woman. This way, the likelihood of rejection will decline, and the threat to his self-esteem will diminish.

This single male's *ego,* therefore, inhibited, rather than abetted, his search for cultured female companionship. If he simply forgot the "danger" to his pride (which of course is completely in his head and represents no actual danger in the empirical world), then he could telephone the woman he strongly desires and might indeed make her acquaintance. Should she *rebuff* his advances, he would naturally feel disappointed, but because his entire value as a human being is not in jeopardy, he would not feel *ashamed or humiliated.*

When a person views her*self* as "worthless" and feels humiliated, she is then inclined to view herself as *incapable of correcting her poor performances.* She will then tend to give up and to rationalize her withdrawal from outside activities or interpersonal relationships. After all, she reasons, how could a worthless bum such as I succeed at anything truly significant? On the other hand, if an individual views her current *behavior,* rather than her*self,* as deficient, she will likely have the view that "through more practice and effort, I may in the future rectify my previously deficient behavior."

Pause to ask yourself this question: Does your long nose or your poor complexion *really* prevent you from asking out potentially desirable partners? Or rather is it your fear of ego-deflation that deters you from asking? It would be beneficial for women, especially, to give careful thought to similar questions because, in our silly society, it is still considered more "risky" for a woman to ask out a man than vice versa.

Likewise, our "self-esteem" inhibits us from participating in any activity in which failure is deemed disgraceful. And because failure in virtually *any* endeavor is deemed disgraceful by the self-esteeming individual, he becomes distinctly afraid to try anything unfamiliar. He passively goes through life doing what he's always done, rarely involving himself in enterprises and human relationships whose success is not guaranteed in

advance. Far from inspiring productive behavior and social interaction, the concept of self-esteem is *the most inhibiting* philosophy imaginable. That "most men lead lives of quiet desperation" can perhaps be traced to our chilling fear of losing self-esteem and to our resulting tendency toward a mundane, routine, "safe" existence.

Remember Key Point #4: The concept of self-esteem usually promotes social and behavioral inhibition.

I don't mean to suggest that a philosophy of self-esteem inevitably leads to passive behavior; for clearly such an assertion would be absurd. Even the most timid person occasionally throws caution to the wind and accepts the challenge of new adventure. Tragically, however, this person's actual enjoyment of her bold adventure will usually be minimal. Her anxieties, moreover, will often be intense, for she still believes devoutly that her *entire value as a human being* depends upon her success at this new activity or relationship. And with so much at stake (i.e., her entire worth *as a person*), she cannot possibly enjoy the intrinsic pleasures of the moment. She lives in constant terror of "making a fool out of *herself*."

Returning to our previous illustration: The average-looking, average-intelligence bachelor may indeed build up enough courage to telephone the beautiful and brilliant woman. But he will clutch the telephone nervously as he dials. His hands and forehead will sweat profusely as her number rings. And his heart will palpitate uncontrollably as she picks up the receiver. Regardless of how smoothly the conversation flows, he will derive little intrinsic pleasure from the experience, because he fears that at any moment he might say the wrong thing and his self-esteem would surely die a tortured death.

Perversely, an individual's self-esteem-related anxiety usually *hinders,* rather than *enhances,* her progress toward her chosen goal, the goal which, ironically, she seeks to accomplish in order to merit self-esteem! So she thoroughly defeats herself by maintaining this silly ego-bolstering philosophy. Her anxieties sabotage her objectives, because she concentrates principally on *how* she is doing, rather than on *what* she is doing. Her drive for self-esteem can be described accurately as a built-in self-destruct mechanism.

The male with erectile difficulties, for example, often creates for himself the specific sexual dysfunction he seeks to avoid so desperately. Instead of focusing in bed on his female *partner,* and thereby becoming sexually aroused, he obsessively monitors his *own* body for signs of potency. He must demonstrate his "manliness"; he must prove himself "worthy." He does not pleasurably concentrate his thinking on sexually exciting images; instead, he literally terrifies himself with exaggerated visions of sexual failure and the resulting insufferable humiliation. His drive for self-esteem therefore is an impediment, rather than an asset, in bed. If this individual stopped distracting himself with meaningless self-rating tabulations, he might find it considerably easier to focus attention on his girlfriend and thereby become satisfyingly aroused. But because of his ego-centered fixation, his thoughts will converge only on himself and his holy self-esteem.

The inexperienced public speaker also suffers self-esteem-related anxieties. She imagines herself becoming tongue-tied or failing to recall her memorized text. She sees ghastly images of the audience laughing at her and ridiculing her dismal performance. She foresees her face becoming red and her voice quivering. She thus concentrates, not on the content of her speech, but on the need to preserve her self-esteem by avoiding such embarrassments. She suffers anxiety because her self-esteem is in danger of being lost. And this same disquieting anxiety will render almost impossible a smooth, professional delivery of her speech.

Remember Key Point #5: A compulsive drive for self-esteem leads to frequent anxiety. And self-esteem-related anxiety is an obstacle to achieving those goals essential to our self-esteem!

We now find ourselves boxed in completely. If our self-worth depends upon external achievement, then naturally we believe that we *must* achieve. But if we *must* achieve, then our anxiety becomes so distressing and burdensome that we often withdraw from the activities and relationships that we might enjoy the most. We withdraw in dreadful fear of an ego-crushing failure or rejection. If, however, we do not withdraw, our self-esteem-related anxiety often makes our behavior inept and our social relations inelegant; and when we perceive these behaviors and relationships to be faltering, we bestow upon ourselves, not self-esteem, but self-damnation. The self-damnation, in turn, makes us feel unworthy and *incapable* of future success. And since we are "therefore" incapable of ever achieving our chosen goal, we lose hope and withdraw once again from a potentially enjoyable part of living.

Quite a pickle indeed! But can we somehow escape our boxed-in predicament? Is there an alternative to this self-defeating philosophy?

Yes! We can help ourselves immeasurably toward greater happiness and emotional stability. We can fairly rapidly overcome our needless anxieties, while profoundly enriching our enjoyment of life. We can conquer our social and behavioral inhibitions with surprisingly meager effort. Yes, we can indeed annihilate our self-sabotaging philosophy, but *only* if we are willing to pay the price. *That* is the all-important point, so I'm going to say it twice. **We definitely can prevail over anxiety and inhibition, but *only* if we are willing to make a sacrifice: surrendering our compulsive drive for self-esteem. There is no other way to help ourselves in this regard.**

We are easily misled, however. We simplemindedly think that we can get something for nothing: that somewhere there is a Garden of Eden, where bountiful fruit may be harvested without corresponding work or sacrifice. Through the physical sciences, we learn that energy cannot be created out of nothing. In economic theory, we know there is no "free lunch." It is therefore somewhat naive to propose that *genuine* emotional or psychological benefit may be realized without some expenditure of work or sacrifice. In my opinion, this is why the "positive self-image" manuals usually fail to help the reader.

These books claim to remedy self-condemnation without extracting the corresponding sacrifice of self-esteem. The reader, in other words, is promised something for nothing.

Since an individual temporarily enjoys an exhilarating euphoria when "esteeming himself," he may understandably be reluctant to sacrifice this intoxicating, positive self-image. On the other hand, he will probably be quite eager to rid himself as quickly as possible of inhibition, anxiety, and feelings of self-deprecation when he fails or is rejected. He must therefore make a choice: His choice, however, is not a choice between self-esteem and self-condemnation, for both attitudes are inseparable manifestations of the same self-rating philosophy. Rather, his choice is whether he will (or will not) rate himself at all, positively *or* negatively. He must choose between having a self-image and having *no* self-image.

Instead of labeling *herself* as honorable or as foolish, an individual can more accurately and specifically rate the *efficiency or inefficiency of her external actions*, a subtle yet critical difference in perception. Instead of speculating emptily that *she* is intrinsically noble or that *she* is intrinsically worthless, she can more scientifically view her outside *behavior* as *advantageous or as disadvantageous to her chosen goals.* She can, in other words, refuse to entertain any *self*-image. She can restrict herself to observing and evaluating the empirical universe, of which her behavior is a part, and forget about inventing and perpetuating any kind of *self*-image, which exists only as an egocentric vapor in her head. There is no law of science nor of psychology that requires an individual habitually to calculate her "self-value." She does not *have* to continually monitor her "worth." She can simply refuse to go along with the anxious, inhibited, self-appraising crowd.

Let us go back to our illustration of the average-looking, average-intelligence male attracted to the brilliant and accomplished female. So long as he abstains from consciously rating *himself,* he can pursue the relationship even though success is far from guaranteed. If he is rejected, then his "ego" suffers no agony, though his romantic and sexual desires will, of course, be frustrated. If, on the contrary, he does consciously rate *himself* as a human being, then a rejection will be viewed as painful humiliation and as incontrovertible evidence of his essential worthlessness.

So, remember Key Point #6: To overcome self-esteem-related anxiety and inhibition, recognize that your choice is not between self-esteem and self-condemnation. Your choice, rather, is between establishing an overall self-image and establishing *no* self-image. That is, you can choose to view your external *actions* and *traits* as desirable or undesirable, but abstain from esteeming or damning *yourself* as a whole.

In practice, the average person appears to spend only a scant few moments each day consciously tabulating her "self-worth" (though these brief periods of self-appraisal are quite sufficient to establish and reinforce an *overall* psychological inclination toward self-rating.) She spends most of her hours, however, observing her external environment

and trying to do something interesting or productive within that environment. If, then, she already spends *most* of her time *not* contemplating her self-worth, why can she not, through resolution and industry, eliminate virtually *all* of her self-rating? The answer, of course, is that she *can* eliminate her self-rating, once she recognizes that such an absence of self-image is possible and is, in fact, preferable to her frequent anxiety and inhibition.

Other members of the animal kingdom do not seem to ruminate much over their "self-worth." One rarely sees a self-esteeming alligator or a self-despising kangaroo. Animals other than man seem completely content as *egoless* creatures, simply observing the outside world. They seem entirely free from the anxieties and hang-ups suffered so often by their self-centered human cousins.

It may be convincingly argued that other animals are intellectually inferior to man and thus possess no capacity for self-esteem. Perhaps so, but the "dumb" animals also possess no capacity for astrology, for superstition, nor for bigotry. Neither do the "inferior" animals devote themselves fanatically to a crackpot religion. So it is amply apparent that the superior human intellect often invents and adheres to unhealthy philosophical systems. It is just possible that the philosophy of self-esteem fits neatly and properly into that category.

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Comments on David Mills' "Overcoming Self-Esteem"

by Albert Ellis, Ph.D.

I am delighted that David Mills has taken off from some of my main ideas about human worth and self-esteem and has written this important essay. If people follow the views that he has presented, I cannot give them a guarantee but can give them a high degree of probability that they will make themselves less anxious and, as he shows, more achieving. Even if they achieve little during their lives, they will enable themselves to live more peacefully and happily with themselves and others. Again, in all probability!

However, the solution to the problem of self-worth that David Mills gives -- rating only one's deeds, acts, and performances and *not* one's self, being, or essence -- is what I call

the *elegant* solution. Because most humans seem to be born with a strong tendency to make misleading *global* evaluations of their "self," as well as to make fairly accurate *specific* evaluations of their performances, I have found clinically that my rational-emotive behavior therapy (REBT) clients often have great difficulty in *not* rating their self and in *only* rating their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in regard to the results they achieve by creating and engaging in these responses. I therefore teach most of them the "elegant" philosophic solution that David Mills has beautifully outlined; but I also give them the choice of "inelegant" or practical solution to their self-concept. Thus, somewhere during the first few sessions of REBT I say something like this to my clients:

"You very likely were born and reared with both self-actualizing and self-defeating tendencies and you can use the former to overcome the latter. Self-actualizingly, you are born to think, to think about your thinking, and to think about thinking about your thinking. Consequently, whenever you defeat yourself, you can observe your conduct, think differently, and free yourself to change your feelings and your habits. But it's not easy and you'd better keep working at it!

"Perhaps your main self-helping tendency is to sanely rate or evaluate what you do -- this is, whether your acts are 'good' and helpful or 'bad' and unhelpful. Without measuring your feelings and acts, you would not repeat the 'good' and not change the 'bad' ones. Unfortunately, however, you are also biologically and socially predisposed to rate your self, your being, your essence as 'good' or 'bad' and, by using these global ratings, to get yourself into trouble. For you *are* not what you *do*, as general semanticist Alfred Korzybski pointed out in 1933. You are a *person who* does millions of acts during your life -- some 'good' and some 'bad' and some 'indifferent.' As a person, you are too complex and many-sided to rate *yourself* (or rate any other pluralistic human) and to do so totally, globally, or generally. When you make this kind of global rating of your 'youness,' you end up as a 'good person,' and presumably better than other people and that is a grandiose, godlike view. Or, more frequently, because you are indubitably fallible and imperfect, you view yourself as a "bad person," presumably undeserving, worthless, and incapable of changing your behaviors and of *doing* better. So *self* rating leads to deification or devil-ification. Watch it! and go back to only measuring what you *do* and not what you supposedly *are*.

"If, however, you have difficulty refusing to rate your *self*, your *being*, you can arbitrarily convince yourself, 'I am "good" or "okay" because I exist, because I am alive, because I am human.' This is not an elegant solution to a problem of self-worth, because I (or anyone else) could reply, 'But I think you are "bad" or "worthless" because you are human and alive.' Which of us is correct? Neither of us: because we are both arbitrarily *defining* you as 'good' or 'bad,' and our definitions are not really provable nor falsifiable. They are just that: *definitions*.

"Defining yourself as 'good,' however, will give you much better results than believing that you are 'bad' or 'rotten.' Therefore, this inelegant conclusion works and is a fairly good *practical* or *pragmatic* solution to the problem of human 'worth.' So if you *want* to rate your *self* or your *being*, you can definitionally, tautologically, or axiomatically use

this 'solution' to self-rating. Better yet, however, as I have pointed out in *Reason and Emotion in Psychotherapy, Humanistic Psychotherapy, A Guide to Rational Living*, and a number of my other writings, and as David Mills emphasizes in this essay, you can use the 'elegant' REBT solution to rating yourself. That is, give up all your ideas about self-esteem, stick only to those of unconditional acceptance, and choose to accept your self, your existence, your humanity *whether or not* you perform well, *whether or not* you are loved by significant others, and *whether or not* you suffer from school, work, sports, or other handicaps."

This is what I usually say to my therapy clients. As David Mills aptly points out, you can recognize that your absence of self-image is possible and is, in fact, preferable to frequent anxiety and inhibition. Your goal can be to *enjoy*, rather than to *prove* yourself, for the rest of your unself-esteeming life!

Suggested Additional Materials

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- Korzybski, A. *Science and Sanity*. San Francisco, CA: International Society of General Semantics, 1933.

- Lazarus, A.A. Toward an Egoless State of Being. In A. Ellis & R. Grieger (Eds.), *Handbook of Rational-Emotive Therapy,* Vol. 1 (pp. 113-116). New York: Springer, 1977.